

Body Language June 20

The capture of the collection ship USS *Pueblo* in January 1968 was a serious setback to the U.S. SIGINT system. The North Koreans, in capturing the ship, gained access to a wealth of classified documents and equipment.

For the *Pueblo* crew, the capture meant nearly a year in hell. Beatings were administered for the slightest infraction of the rules or, sometimes, for no apparent reason at all. All North Koreans had been propagandized from birth to hate Americans, and now the guards had 81 Americans under their total control.

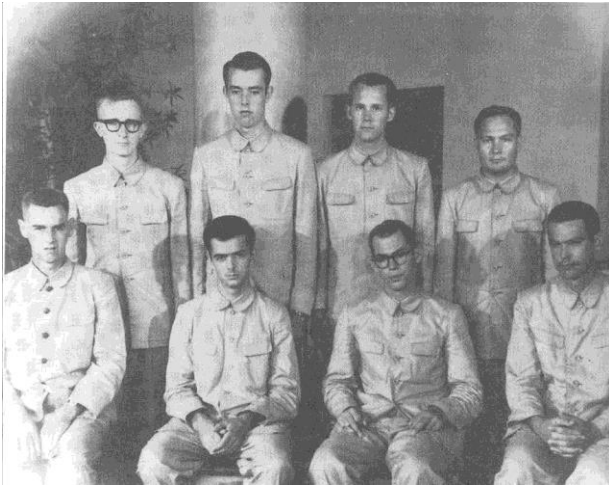
Despite significant risks, the *Pueblo* crewmen resisted in small ways. The resistance did nothing to ameliorate their situation, but it raised their morale a good deal. In many ways these petty acts of malice likely helped crewmembers survive their ordeal.

One way to resist was to take advantage of their captors' lack of knowledge about the popular culture of the United States and about American English. For example, at a staged press conference that was to be broadcast widely, Lieutenant Commander Lloyd Bucher, the *Pueblo's* captain, admitted to a serious crime "for which we are deeply shy."

When asked to suggest U.S. officials who should get propaganda letters, the crew named General Barney Google, Jimmy Hoffa, Tom Swift, and the Reverend Doctor Hugh Hefner.

There is one act of resistance by the *Pueblo* crew that has become legendary.

The crew was constantly bombarded with North Korean propaganda materials, both written and on film. In June, the crew watched a “news” film showing the North Korean soccer team playing in London; in one scene, British attendees raised their middle fingers to the North Korean players, who bowed and smiled at the gesture. Members of the *Pueblo* crew realized as they viewed the newsreel that the North Koreans did not understand the obscene meaning of the gesture.



Even though they recognized the consequences that could ensue thereafter, members of the *Pueblo* crew, when asked to pose for propaganda photographs, would subtly extend their middle fingers to the camera. The North Koreans noticed this and questioned some of the crewmembers, who told their captors that the gesture was a “Hawaiian good luck symbol.”



This explanation was accepted. Some North Korean guards even began using it. On one occasion, when some crewmembers were being taken to a staged press conference, their guards raised their middle fingers to them and wished them good luck.

However, this small triumph could not last. *Life Magazine*, a weekly picture publication, which must have had the least vulgar readers in America, reprinted the propaganda photos

and explained clearly what the gesture meant, adding a comment that the North Koreans had lost out to the U.S. Navy.

This led to what the crewmembers recalled as “hell week.”

When crewmembers had considered “flipping the bird” to the North Koreans, one of them asked Commander Bucher what he thought. Bucher had warned that it could lead to extra punishment, but said, “We’d lose the battle. But we’d win the war.”

An historian of the *Pueblo* incident later wrote, "... by surviving, they won the war."

As a postscript, many years later, a magazine for Navy veterans ran a photograph of a reunion of the *Pueblo* crew. Many reunion attendees posed as a group with their middle fingers extended. This photo ran on the cover, and the editor prepared a form letter of defense for the torrent of protest mail he expected. According to the story, he got less than five.

SOURCES: Mitchell Lerner, *The Pueblo Incident*
Lloyd Mark Bucher, *My Story*

502 caption: photos 1 and 2 --- *Pueblo* crew members in prison uniforms, some of them extending their middle fingers